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Saginaw Bay Water Trail making waves

STEVE GRIFFIN
for the Daily News

Kayaks, canoes and other non-motorized watercraft don't leave tracks, but they do take to trails. Water trails, that is, also known as blueways.

One of them, the Saginaw Bay Water Trail, is among blueway projects sharing nearly \$185,000 in grants to coastal communities and groups through the Department of Environmental Quality's Office of the Great Lakes and its Coastal Zone Management (CZM) program. (Some of the money is from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.)

The Saginaw Bay Water Trail Alliance, through a partnership with the Saginaw Bay Resource, Conservation and Development Area, Inc., and consultants, received two grants.

The first, for \$12,500, will prepare for construction of about 30 paddling access sites along the Arenac and Bay county shorelines of Saginaw Bay, to become part of the Michigan Water Trail System.

The second grant, for \$45,850, will help local trails organizers develop marketing materials: a Saginaw Bay Water Trail website, promotional video, trail brochure, posters, media information, a plan for signage along the trail, and social media.

As with most CZM grants, local sources will match the grant amounts, doubling the size of the projects.



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Frank Starkweather, president of the Saginaw Bay Water Trail Alliance.

Frank Starkweather, of Bay City, is president of the Saginaw Bay Water Trail Alliance. Not a paddler, he admits, but an organizer of community activities and events, he said research shows water trails or 'blueways' are increasingly popular nationwide and in Michigan.

Along the state's eastern shoreline, Starkweather said in an interview here last week, a 41-site Tip of the Thumb Heritage Water Trail traces that region from southern Lake Huron to Quanicassée along the Tuscola/Bay County line.

Another, the Huron Shores Coastal Water Trail, runs from Tawas north to the Straits of Mackinac.

That left an empty spot along Saginaw Bay's coastline in Bay and Arenac counties, and state officials a couple of years ago urged people in those counties to fill that gap.

An earlier set of DEQ-administered Coastal Zone Management grants paid for comprehensive trail plans for the two counties.

Bay County produced a water-resistant map for both counties, showing paddling opportunities and support facilities. (Novel features include icons that paddlers can scan with a smart phone to access information; unlike physical signage, said Starkweather, they're not subject to vandalism.)

Arenac County's plan was so comprehensive—photos, GPS coordinates, development options, cost estimates and more—that it's been used as a model. Bay County, in fact, followed its map with an Arenac-County-like trail plan of its own.

Paddling access isn't necessarily the same as boating access. The Bay has plenty of road ends and other relatively unimproved access sites. There are also modern boat ramps—from which kayakers, Starkweather said, shy away.

"Some of the sites we assumed to be usable, such as DNR launch ramps, we found kayakers just won't use." Concrete grooved to provide traction for tow vehicles becomes an abrasive rasp to which owners of sleek, expensive composite craft won't subject their boats. "They'll drive a mile and a half to a road end or something," instead, Starkweather said.

Trail organizers are exploring modifications

that might make the more developed launch sites more appealing.

Some development is already taking place: Starkweather said launch modifications are being made at Point Au Gres Park in Arenac County, under the 2013 grant.

By summer's end, Starkweather said he expects the 30 sites to be selected for work, with grants and matches then sought to do construction next year.

In time, Starkweather said, he hopes to get Saginaw and Gladwin counties involved in water trail mapping, and Midland County, too. They're all part of the Saginaw Bay watershed, Michigan's largest and one explored and settled by water, he noted.

He also noted that the Saginaw Bay Water Trail and the newly announced, Detroit-to-western-Upper-Peninsula Iron Belle hiking and biking trail run close together along Saginaw Bay; he said planners will explore ways to capitalize on 'inter-modal' opportunities.

Other Great Lakes water trails grants went to the city of South Haven to install accessible drop-off, launch and parking facilities along two water trails; to the St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission to host a field day for national water trail leaders; and to the Land Information Access Association so it can assist up to 10 communities in developing water trail master plans.